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Torn between America and China: Elite Perceptions and Indonesian Foreign Policy

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Hastings makes some odd assertions. For both JI and GAM, he writes at one point: ‘once they were outside the grasp of the Indonesian government, the exact location of their training was not so material, a testament to the glories of globalisation and modern aviation, and the flexibility in training routes relative to logistics’ (120). But there were very strong reasons for the choice of the Afghan–Pakistan border and Mindanao for JI, and Libya for GAM, and to reduce the rationale simply to a need to leave Indonesia makes no sense.

The book is not helped by clunky writing. Of an arms-purchasing trip to Mindanao, Hastings writes: ‘It was an arduous journey along the contours of the physical landscape; friendly factions of the state, in the form of corruption, nevertheless helped navigate what otherwise would have been a precarious route’. Or:

When the MILF [Moro Islamic Liberation Front] as a whole turned ambivalent, and then hostile at approximately the same time as the crackdowns in Indonesia hampered the recruit sending mechanisms, JI adapted, but found it difficult to operate at the level to which it had previously been accustomed. (76)

In short, *No Man’s Land* is an example of an interesting topic that needs more work.

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Daniel Novotny, *Torn between America and China: Elite Perceptions and Indonesian Foreign Policy*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010, pp. 400, ISBN 978 9 8142 7959 8.

Daniel Novotny’s *Torn between American and China* presents a thorough and engaging account of Indonesian diplomacy from the Sukarno era to the post-Suharto period, with a special emphasis on the perceptions of the Indonesian foreign policy elite. Novotny is to be commended for his willingness to elicit Indonesian understandings of its foreign policy orientations, beginning with his utilisation of the Indonesian understanding of ‘the elite’, or *elit*, a term encompassing prominent businessmen, military leaders and policy makers in the bureaucracy, along with leading journalists and intellectuals, who often maintain close ties with the political establishment (61). Interviews with 45 members of the contemporary Indonesian foreign policy elite serve as the primary source of empirical data. From this rich qualitative data, a number of compelling quantitative conclusions are presented, often in easily comprehensible graph form.

The book is structured into three key sections: a lengthy theoretical overview coupled with an interesting discussion of the nature, background and make-up of the Indonesian foreign policy elite (Part I); *elit* perceptions of the threat posed by the so-called ‘superpowers’ of the United States and China (Part II); and perceptions of the so-called ‘middle’ regional powers such as Australia, Japan, India and other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including Singapore and Malaysia (Part III). The book concludes with an analysis of Indonesia’s likely short-term and long-term threats, as well as an assessment of the intriguing, yet ultimately doubtful, notion of ‘elite consensus’ among Indonesia’s foreign policy elite.

In the theoretical chapter, the Western-originated, realist ‘balance of power’ paradigm of international relations is discussed at length. This paradigm stipulates that countries will strive to balance the most powerful state or rising hegemonic power as a means of trying to upset the status quo in the interstate system. Yet, Novotny argues that the international relations of Asia, and Indonesia in particular, have challenged these neo-realist assumptions.

Indonesia's President Suharto, for instance, hardly displayed any balancing behaviour directed against the United States—the cold war era's most powerful country. Suharto, and his post-authoritarian replacements, also failed to pursue a balancing strategy against the progressively rising might of China, which has emerged as the latest superpower. This is contrary to realist expectations, thus leading to the mistaken impression of Indonesian foreign policy as being 'irrational', 'haphazard' and 'inconsistent'.

As a means of correcting the surprisingly popular neo-realist perspective, Novotny highlights what he regards as an equally important dynamic in international politics—the so-called 'balance of fear', which is a constructivist offshoot of realism. The book leans, therefore, towards a constructivist approach, 'which operates on the individual level, namely state elites' (45). This approach emphasises the importance of shared histories, norms, attitudes and perceptions among the *elit* actors engaged in foreign policy formation. Novotny also quite rightly emphasises the importance of a 'leader-centric' approach when analysing Indonesia's foreign policy, especially since much of Indonesia's foreign affairs management has been principally in the hands of one autocratic ruler or another. Presidents Sukarno and Suharto, for instance, 'infused into Indonesia's foreign relations a great deal of their respective idiosyncrasies, along with their personal ambitions and prejudices' (24). As one of Novotny's interviewees ('a Muslim politician') points out: 'to understand Indonesian foreign policy, you have to understand the man from *Cendana* [Suharto's home address]' (34).

Novotny paints a picture of contrast between the earlier Sukarno and Suharto regimes and the present period of diplomacy: 'the contemporary Indonesian foreign policy-making is determined by democratic political processes with the direct and indirect participation of a sheer variety of stakeholders who are involved in constant mixed-motive bargaining' (62). With its embrace of democratisation, Novotny argues that Indonesian foreign policy-making has become a much more complex affair, with 'mixed and diverse views'—likened by one informant to a *gado-gado* salad, one of Indonesia's most popular national dishes, characterised by a large number of ingredients (65). Since the fall of the Suharto regime, democratic Indonesia has become an increasingly plural, open society comprising different competing groups that hold different views and attitudes. In terms of the foreign policy-making process, one respondent states that: 'in Indonesia, if you have a group of leaders articulating one policy, [concurrently] you have another group of people who have a different agenda' (64). Another interviewee claims that the rise in divergent views among the foreign policy *elit* is due to President Yudhoyono's 'lack of leadership' in contrast to Sukarno and Suharto. Yet, Novotny's book demonstrates that this is precisely one of the strengths of Yudhoyono's presidency—his willingness to avoid the totalitarian 'strongman' mantle and incorporate an eclectic mix of views, for better or for worse. This is reflected, for instance, in a seemingly symbolic decision in 2008 to establish the position of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, as the 'President's foreign affairs policy line is not necessarily correct in the eyes of the Foreign Minister, likewise the other way round' (64). Such a step would have been unheard of in the Suharto or Sukarno eras.

In terms of the book's key arguments—those of Indonesia's relationships with the United States, China and other key regional powers—Novotny's interviews provide the reader with many interesting and eclectic insights. The main conclusion is that, as in the cold war era, Indonesia will need to successfully 'navigate' a foreign policy course between 'the two reefs' of the United States and China. Fortunately, Novotny's book, despite its somewhat narrow title, does not leave it at that. Part III examines Indonesia's relationships with its other neighbours, which appear to be equally important as the United States and China, and in many ways are more demanding of the time and energy of Indonesia's foreign policy elite. If anything, Indonesia's tense relations with Malaysia, not to mention its recent determination to demonstrate a bit of regional clout in ASEAN, suggest that post-authoritarian Indonesia is not 'torn' between the United States and China at all, but rather quite content to forge its own path and fight its own battles, under its own head of steam.

In relation to the above observation, if perchance Novotny had expanded his cohort of interviewees to include the foreign policy elite of Indonesia's regional counterparts, including Malaysia and Australia, his book might have provided a more expansive perception of

Indonesia's place in the world. This is important to consider because, as it stands, the Indonesian foreign policy elite appears to be divided in its perceptions, demonstrating a 'lack of elite consensus' with regard to Indonesia's perceived friends or foes, some of whom, such as Malaysia, Australia and the United States, appear to be a bit of both. Moreover, a good deal of the pessimism of the foreign affairs *elit* is directed towards Indonesia itself. As Salim Said states on the back-cover blurb of *Torn between American and China*: 'there are many of us [Indonesians] who consider the real threat to be coming more from inside than outside'. Perhaps a follow-up study, investigating the historical roots of this peculiar brand of nationalistic pessimism (hitherto overshadowed by the optimism of nationalism), might be of use. As it is, I must make a final comment on the book in front of me: Novotny deserves to be congratulated for skilfully harnessing his combination of international relations theory and empirical data gleaned from the key policy makers. This is because the end result allows us to hear, loud and clear, Indonesian voices providing us with a thoroughly 'Indonesian' slant on Indonesia's foreign policy formation.

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Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.), *America's Challenges in the Greater Middle East: The Obama Administration's Policies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 284, ISBN 978 0 2301 1277 3.

This engaging, ambitious and sometimes disturbing volume brings home the complexity of the challenges the United States faces as it tries to define and promote US interests amidst the ambiguity and contradictory pressures of the Middle East. Showing signs of being reworked at the last minute to take account of the turbulent first few months of 2011, it offers few insights into how the United States should proceed, particularly as the Arab Spring unfolds and US politics focuses ever more intently on domestic economic and political affairs. But its analysis makes compelling reading.

The book encapsulates three core themes. The first is that the policy measures and signals of the United States under President Obama have marked a departure from the transformative neoconservative agenda of the George W. Bush era in the direction of a more realist approach to political and other actors in the Middle East. Obama is presented as an idealist who understands the limits of US power. His vision of the US role in the Middle East is based around a position that reform in the region may be welcomed, exhorted and supported where it is broadly consistent with US interests, but the process of change is not going to be driven by the United States.

The second theme is that far from promoting positive and constructive engagement on the basis of mutual respect, by taking a realist approach, Obama has frequently tolerated or even arguably encouraged recalcitrance at the state level among US friends and foes alike. Where US interests are directly concerned in regard to Israel and the Palestinians, and sometimes elsewhere, the Obama administration has taken 'no' for an answer all too often, without necessarily appreciating the damage involved for wider US agendas.

A notable strength of the book is its analysis of regional responses to Obama's outreach. Akbarzadeh lucidly explains how the Iranian regime, faced with Obama's offer to restore a balanced dialogue, was in no hurry to end an adversarial relationship. Confrontational dealings with the United States had shaped its strategic vision and helped to sustain its authoritarian rule as well. Michelle Dunne notes that in Egypt, Hosny Mubarak took advantage of the change in US tone to reverse the timid shoots of political reform which had emerged in the early period of the Bush administration, and suffered no real penalties for